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Leveraging rural teaching strategies from the COVID-19 era to build resilient learning environments: A case study from South Africa

[1*]Mofokeng-Mokoena Patricia Sentle and [2]Kananga Robert Mukuna
[1]Department of Humanities, University of the KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
[2]Department of Education Foundations, University of the Free State, South Africa
[1*]Primary author: mofokengsp177@gmail.com

***Abstract*—** This study explores how rural teachers and learners in South Africa responded to the educational challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and how their adaptive strategies can inform long-term, inclusive teaching practices. Grounded in Resilience Theory and Inclusive Pedagogy, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of six learners and two teachers at a quintile one high school in the Maluti-a-Phofung district, Free State province. Data were collected via semi-structured WhatsApp interviews and analysed thematically. Findings highlight four key enablers of resilience: access to basic digital resources, teacher training in technology use, community and parental involvement, and learner adaptability. The study argues that grassroots strategies developed during the crisis offer valuable models for sustainable, equity-focused education in rural contexts beyond the pandemic. These insights contribute to the development of responsive, future-ready schooling systems that prioritise continuity and inclusion.

Keywords: Digital equity, Future preparedness, Post-COVID schooling, Resilient education, Rural high schools, South Africa, Teacher strategies

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE COVID-19 pandemic was more than a health crisis; it caused an unprecedented global disruption in education, revealing and worsening longstanding inequalities, especially in rural and under-resourced communities (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023; United Nations, 2022). While urban schools typically had access to digital infrastructure and online learning options, many rural learners and teachers lacked the necessary tools, skills, and support systems to adapt to emergency remote learning (Zhou et al., 2024). In South Africa, the situation was particularly difficult. Rural schools, already affected by historical neglect, infrastructure gaps, and poverty, were hit hardest by school closures (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2024; Ramokgopa, 2024). The Department of Basic Education's shift to digital platforms during lockdowns, although driven by policy, did not adequately consider the limited internet access, unreliable electricity, and lack of digital literacy among both teachers and learners in rural areas (Mthembu & Dlamini, 2025; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2022). The digital divide significantly hindered ongoing learning and exacerbated educational inequalities (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2022).

However, amid this adversity, rural teachers and learners showed remarkable resilience. Teachers adapted with low-tech solutions such as WhatsApp audio messages, printed materials, and community study groups (Nkambule, 2023; Govender, 2022). Learners relied on family support and peer collaboration to stay engaged with their education (Sabates, 2020). Though often undocumented, these common innovations demonstrate significant pedagogical ingenuity and indicate that the system's margins can become sites of transformation (Vally & Motala, 2021).

This study critically examines the strategies employed by teachers and learners at a rural high school in South Africa during the peak of the pandemic. It aims to understand how they managed the crisis and how their methods can guide broader efforts to establish inclusive, resilient teaching practices during crises. By focusing on localized, experience-based strategies, the study enhances understanding of how rural education can shift from reactive responses to proactive transformation in a post-pandemic setting.

Despite the increasing acknowledgment of these grassroots initiatives, a significant deficiency persists in documenting and theorizing them as models for enduring resilience. This research addresses that deficiency by focusing on the following research question: How can the strategies employed by teachers and learners during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural settings be adapted into sustainable, inclusive practices for future emergencies? To facilitate this investigation, the study utilizes two interrelated frameworks: Resilience Theory, which investigates how individuals and systems recuperate from and adapt to challenges (Masten, 2021), and Inclusive Pedagogy, which promotes adaptable, equity-focused teaching practices that respond to the varied needs of learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). These frameworks inform the analysis and interpretation of the strategies examined in this research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The pandemic has prompted a worldwide re-evaluation of how education systems prepare for, respond to, and recover from large-scale disruptions (UNESCO, 2023; Organisation for Economic Cooperation

and Development [OECD], 2022). While the initial response centered on emergency remote teaching, the post-pandemic discussion has shifted toward developing long-term educational resilience, defined as the ability of learners, educators, and institutions to adapt, innovate, and recover from systemic shocks (Zhou et al., 2024; Winthrop & Ziegler, 2022). In the South African context, studies highlight that rural schools were not just victims of digital exclusion but also agents of innovation Ahiaku et al., 2025; Ramokgopa, 2024). Teachers in under-resourced areas employed creative solutions, such as using community radio to broadcast lessons, repurposing feature phones for instruction, and conducting home visits when possible (Govender, 2022; Ndile, 2023). These efforts highlight the importance of context-specific, low-tech strategies in addressing the access gap where high-tech solutions are insufficient.

However, challenges persist as studies conducted by Spaull and Van der Berg (2022) and Mhlanga and Moloi (2022) show that learners in rural areas faced significantly greater learning losses than their urban peers. These gaps stem from material inequalities and policy blind spots, where rural needs are viewed as exceptions rather than essential to national planning (Vally & Motala, 2021). Globally, Winthrop and Ziegler (2022) advocate for a "resilient education compact" that combines technology, psychosocial support, community involvement, and teacher training. Additionally, Sabates (2020) emphasizes the importance of community partnerships and parental involvement in maintaining learning continuity during crises, a point also highlighted in the present study. These insights align with those of Zhou et al. (2024), who propose a multi-layered resilience framework encompassing infrastructure, teaching methods, and governance.

Notably, the literature also warns against techno-solutionism. Azevedo et al. (2021) argue that just providing digital tools without supporting capacity-building efforts reinforces existing structural inequalities. Therefore, resilience-building in rural education needs to be comprehensive, focusing on hardware and human agency, relational networks, and adaptive practices (Ahiaku et al., 2025).

This study builds on this growing body of literature by offering empirical insights from a rural South African high school. It seeks to demonstrate how crisis-era strategies, though borne of necessity, hold potential as catalysts for long-term transformation provided, they are appropriately recognised, supported, and integrated into policy frameworks.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explores the strategies employed by teachers and learners in a rural South African high school during the COVID-19 pandemic. It determines their relevance for developing sustainable and resilient education systems in the aftermath of the crisis. While much of the existing research has documented pandemic-related challenges, fewer studies have examined the adaptive responses of rural communities as potential models for future preparedness.

IV. METHODS

Research approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach, prioritizing understanding participants' lived experiences, opinions, and motivations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Oranga & Matere, 2023). Qualitative methods are essential for exploring complex, context-bound phenomena in-depth, making them ideal for capturing how rural teachers and learners navigated educational disruptions (StatPearls, 2023). By focusing on "how" and "why" questions rather than numeric trends, this approach aligns closely with the study's objectives of interpreting participants' adaptive strategies and their implications for future education.

Research paradigm

This study is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which recognizes the importance of understanding lived experiences from the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm is helpful because it allows the researcher to explore what participants experienced during the pandemic and how they made sense of those experiences within their unique rural context. The paradigm is especially relevant for educational research in under-resourced areas, where systemic inequities interact with personal and social meaning-making.

Research design

The study adopted a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 12 learners and teachers during the COVID-19 crisis. Phenomenology enables researchers to delve deeply into how participants perceive, respond to, and adapt to challenges in a rural school setting (Neubauer et al., 2019; Van Manen, 2016). This design aligns directly with the study's objectives, emphasising contextual understanding and the potential for transformation through participant-driven insights.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select eight participants from a rural high school in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district of the Free State province. The sample consisted of six grade 12 learners (three male, three female) and two teachers (one male, one female), all of whom had direct experience with teaching or learning under pandemic conditions. Participants were chosen based on their active involvement in schooling during the COVID-19 lockdowns, ensuring relevance to the research objectives. While small, the sample size aligns with phenomenological research conventions, prioritising depth of insight over statistical generalisability (Smith et al., 2009). The diversity of learner experiences and teacher perspectives enabled triangulation across roles.

Data collection methods

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, conducted remotely via WhatsApp voice notes to ensure safety during the pandemic and accommodate technological limitations in the rural setting. This method enabled flexibility while allowing participants to express themselves in their preferred language and at their convenience. Each participant was interviewed individually, and responses were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for member checking. WhatsApp also reflected the technological constraints explored in the study, making the data collection method context-sensitive and ethically responsive.

Research site

This study was conducted at a high school in Kestell, a rural town within the Maluti-a-Phofung district of the Free State province, South Africa. The school is classified as a quintile one institution serving learners from the lowest socio-economic bracket. It was selected due to its rural context, marked by persistent poverty, limited digital infrastructure, and service delivery challenges, which magnified educational vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to McMillan (2014) and Creswell and Poth (2018), research site selection should be guided by alignment with the study's objectives, the relevance of the context, and the potential to yield meaningful data.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, which includes familiarisation with the data, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, producing the report. Themes were developed inductively, with codes emerging from participant responses rather than being imposed in advance. Coding was conducted manually and verified through peer debriefing to ensure credibility. Cross-role comparison between teachers and learners also enhanced trustworthiness. To ensure the reliability of the study, various strategies were implemented to minimize researcher bias and enhance the credibility of the results. To begin with, bracketing was employed to deliberately set aside the researcher's assumptions and prior knowledge regarding rural education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tufford & Newman, 2012). A reflective journal was kept throughout the data

collection and analysis phases to document personal responses and promote transparency. Member checking was performed by returning transcribed interviews to participants for their validation, enabling them to verify the accuracy of their statements. Furthermore, peer debriefing with academic supervisors facilitated the examination of emerging interpretations, thereby decreasing the potential for biased conclusions. These measures ensured that the findings accurately represented the participants' lived experiences, rather than the researcher's expectations.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Free State Research Ethics Committee (Ref: UFS-HSD2021/1318/22). Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, and for minors, assent was provided by learners while written consent was obtained from their guardians. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, and all data were stored securely. Given the potential for emotional distress when discussing pandemic-related experiences, a referral pathway for psychosocial support was established in collaboration with Manapo Regional Hospital.

V. RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed four main themes, each reflecting a distinct aspect of how learners and teachers approached teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Learners' profile

Participants	Learner 1	Learner 2	Learner 3	Learner 4	Learner 5	Learner 6
Pseudonyms	Lefa	Morena	Modiehi	Sbonga	Puseletso	Pinkie
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female
Age	18	17	17	18	18	17
Grade Level	12	12	12	12	12	12
Residential area	Kestell*	Kestell*	Kestell*	Kestell*	Kestell*	Kestell*
Culture	Sesotho	Sesotho	Sesotho	isiZulu	Sesotho	Sesotho
Guardians	Mother	Grand mother	Aunt	Grandmother and uncle	Aunt	Aunt
Years in phase	4	3	3	4	4	3

***Kestell** is a small maize farming settlement in Free State province, South Africa

Table 2: Teachers' profile

Participants	Teacher 1 (HOD)	Teacher 2
Pseudonyms	Zulu	Ramorapedi
Gender	Male	Female
Age	37	29
Culture	Sesotho culture	IsiZulu culture
Marital status	Single	Single

Digital resource access and infrastructure inequality

One of the most consistent narratives from learners and teachers was the limited access to essential learning tools, such as laptops, smartphones, and stable internet connections. Learners described relying on borrowed or shared devices, and some had no access to digital tools.

"*We had no laptops; some learners tried to use phones, but the data was expensive, and the network was poor*" (Lefa, learner 1).

This reflects widespread findings in South African literature, which confirm the rural-urban digital divide as a major barrier to equitable education (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2022; Ramokgopa, 2024). The inability to engage with online platforms during school closures further alienated rural learners following the national curriculum. Despite these obstacles, learners demonstrated adaptability using WhatsApp, printed home packs, and peer support to access learning materials. This aligns with Govender's (2022) findings on low-tech rural innovations and emphasises the need for scalable models grounded in digital equity, not just device distribution.

Online learning readiness and ICT competence

Although online learning was championed nationally, learners expressed frustration over teachers' lack of digital proficiency and the absence of structured online teaching during the lockdown.

"*Some teachers tried but did not know how to teach with Zoom or Google. They would rather send pictures of notes*" (Modiehi, learner 3).

"*We were not trained on how to use these tools before. We just had to learn as we went along,*" (Teacher A).

This gap in teacher digital literacy has been widely recognized in recent research (Zhou et al., 2024; DBE, 2024). The absence of pre-service or in-service training on EdTech left rural educators to depend on trial-and-error methods during a national emergency. These findings directly support the third objective, which is evaluating the sustainability of such strategies for future disruptions. Importantly, learners also called for continuing online learning post-pandemic, indicating perceived value in hybrid models, particularly for exam preparation and university readiness.

Community and parental engagement as a protective factor

Participants acknowledged the emotional toll of isolation and school closure but highlighted family involvement as a critical buffer. Without formal schooling, many parents and caregivers assumed supportive roles, monitoring study time, discussing school topics, and motivating learners.

"*My aunt helped me wake up early and revise even though she did not know the subjects*" (Pinkie, learner 6).

These findings are consistent with Sabates (2020), who emphasises the role of family-school partnerships in crisis continuity. In the rural context, familial engagement filled the gap left by institutional absence, a valuable insight for resilience-focused education policy.

Adaptive pedagogies and teacher agency

Despite structural constraints, some teachers demonstrated notable creativity. They designed handwritten assignments, arranged small study groups under lockdown rules, and prioritised mental well-being.

"*We knew they were struggling. We had to be more than teachers, sometimes counselors, sometimes motivators*" (Teacher B).

This resonates with Vally and Motala (2021), who call for recognising teacher agency in times of crisis. These findings suggest that bottom-up strategies, although informal, can provide blueprints for post-crisis pedagogical reform, especially in under-resourced schools.

VI. DISCUSSION

The themes emerging from this study provide both a reflection and a critique of post-pandemic rural education in South Africa. What is notable is not only the severity of exclusion experienced by learners and teachers but also the innovative ability of rural communities to adapt in extreme conditions. These adaptations, although reactive, have long-term implications for systemic change.

The challenge of digital access highlighted in theme 1 (digital resource access and infrastructure inequality) reflects broader findings that learners in rural areas lack not only devices and connectivity but also meaningful opportunities to engage with digital pedagogies (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2022; Azevedo et al., 2021). While government efforts have concentrated on infrastructure, the data from this study indicate that without simultaneous investment in skills and support, such efforts may inadvertently deepen inequality (Ramokgopa, 2024; Mangena & Malatji, 2024).

Themes 2 (online readiness and ICT competence) and 3 (parental engagement as a protective factor) highlight non-technical aspects of resilience, community involvement, and emotional support that are often overlooked in formal education planning. The role of caregivers as informal co-educators (Sabates, 2020; Mbhele, 2024) and the emotional labor carried out by teachers (Vally & Motala, 2021) need to be recognised in policy and practice. These aspects align with resilience

theory, which views resilience not only as access to resources but also as relational capacity and adaptive behaviour (UNESCO, 2023; Zhou et al., 2024). Theme 4 (adaptive pedagogies and teacher agency) also demonstrates that teacher innovation in rural settings is deliberate and grounded in local realities. Teachers developed hybrid routines, repurposed mobile technology, and combined pastoral care with pedagogy. This supports findings from Winthrop and Ziegler (2022), who advocate for teacher-led, context-sensitive models of instructional leadership in crisis-prone environments.

What emerges across all themes is a call for education policy that is both equitable and sensitive to context. While the pandemic exposed longstanding failures in resource distribution, it also showed the potential of rural schools to innovate from within. This reinforces the idea that resilience is not just the ability to return to normal but also to reimagine what education can become under new constraints adaptively.

The findings thus serve a dual function: they diagnose the fragility of current systems and propose grounded insights for reform. This duality is central to the fourth objective, which involves generating post-pandemic strategies and will be addressed explicitly in the following section.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the teaching and learning strategies employed during the COVID-19 pandemic at a rural high school in South Africa, with the broader goal of understanding how these practices can contribute to building resilient and inclusive educational systems. Based on the lived experiences of both learners and teachers, the research revealed how rural communities managed significant challenges through resourcefulness, agency, and informal support networks.

The findings reveal a landscape marked by significant infrastructural inequalities, including a lack of digital devices, poor connectivity, and limited digital literacy among teachers, which greatly hindered access to remote learning. Despite this exclusion, learners and teachers demonstrated impressive adaptability, utilizing WhatsApp, relying on family support, improvising with low-tech methods, and cultivating a strong ethic of perseverance. Importantly, these strategies were not just temporary fixes; they planted the seeds for systemic reform. Learners' requests for ongoing online learning, even after the pandemic, highlight the importance of digital inclusion in rural education. Teachers' efforts to support both academic success and emotional well-being during lockdowns demonstrate a more holistic approach to teaching that is culturally responsive and trauma-informed.

Consistent with the study's aims, the findings indicate that rural communities do not merely accept educational policies but are proactive participants who can influence learning during crises. The concept of resilience in education should encompass more than just infrastructure; it must also include relational dynamics, adaptability, and integration into local practices. Innovations arising during crises can be institutionalised employing focused investment in teacher development, context-sensitive curriculum design, and equitable access to technology.

The lessons from this case study carry significant implications for national education planning. Policy frameworks need to include rural voices, develop teachers' digital skills from the ground up, and recognize resilience not as an emergency response but as a core principle of schooling in South Africa.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study, informed by the experiences of both learners and educators during the COVID-19 pandemic, proposes various strategies designed to sustain and improve rural teaching and learning beyond periods of crisis.

Schools are advised to adopt hybrid models that combine face-to-face instruction with simple digital tools such as WhatsApp, radio learning, and pre-loaded tablets. These hybrid approaches proved effective during the pandemic and can help address learning gaps in ongoing educational initiatives. Continuous professional development should focus on enhancing practical digital literacy for rural educators, including both ICT competencies and techniques for integrating technology into everyday lessons. Families have been crucial in supporting education during lockdowns; thus, schools should formalize this assistance by organizing workshops for parents, establishing community homework centres, and fostering shared learning environments. Instead of relying on urban technological frameworks, rural schools need solutions that utilize existing infrastructure, such as solar-powered devices, offline downloadable materials, and data subsidies for both teachers and learners.

The emotional impact of the pandemic has underscored the importance of prioritizing the well-being of both learners and educators. This can be achieved by incorporating life orientation with trauma-informed teaching practices and ensuring access to counselling services whenever possible. Furthermore, schools should document and implement action plans for potential future disruptions, which may encompass strategies for learning continuity, emergency content delivery systems, and flexible assessment models. These recommended strategies are not merely reactions to the challenges presented by COVID-19; they signify substantial opportunities for structural reform within South African rural education.

IX. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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